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RR RUEHMA RUEHPA
DE RUEHN #0026/01 0101528
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FM AMEMBASSY NIAMEY
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC 3174
INFO RUEHZK/ECOWAS COLLECTIVE
RUEHAS/AMEMBASSY ALGIERS 3332
RUEHTRO/AMEMBASSY TRIPOLI

UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 05 NIAMEY 000026

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DEPT: FOR AF/W, BACHMAN; G/TIP FOR ZEITLIN; AF/RSA FOR HARPOLE

E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: PGOV PHUM SMIG SOCI KCRM KWMN NG

SUBJECT: TIP IN A TRANSIT TOWN: AGADEZ, NIGER

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SUMMARY

¶1. During recent travel to Agadez, the principal city of northern Niger, Poloff explored the town's oldest industry - trafficking. Whether in items as benign as cars or as dangerous as drugs and guns, Agadez excels at both legal and illicit cross-border trade. The movement of persons is a perennial component of that trade. However, it is difficult to distinguish unwitting Trafficking in Persons (TIP) victims in hock to traffickers from economic migrants moving of their own volition and on their own dime. Indeed, the latter may become the former at any point in their travel.

¶2. TIP is linked to every other form of illicit activity in the region, from prostitution and cigarette smuggling to bandit attacks on tourists. However, it is hard to tell how big a role it plays vis a vis other activities. After all, trafficking of all kinds is big business in this old caravan town, as it has been for over 400 years. The prospect of economic gain in the world's least developed country motivates both smugglers and the economic migrants in their charge. By virtue of their extent and long history, these problems are intractable but subject to interventions at the margins. Even in the absence of sufficient resources, Government of Niger (GON) officials and local NGOs are using their knowledge of this age-old commerce to minimize some of its human costs. END SUMMARY

MAPPING THE MIGRATION ROUTE

¶3. Agadez is Niger's gateway to the Sahara desert, North Africa, and Europe. Along with Gao in Mali, Agadez shares the distinction of trafficking capital of the Sahel. As in the caravan days, simple geography dictates routes. The most direct route from much of coastal West Africa to North Africa is via Niger and Libya. For centuries, the old caravan town served as the logical jumping off point for travelers motivated by economic interests of every sort. In that, the city has remained consistent.

¶4. While trade in dates, gold, and salt has given way to more modern and illicit fare - cigarettes, arms, drugs, cars and people - much else has remained the same. While Niger's principal north-south axis, the "uranium highway," runs from Niamey through Birni N'Konni, Tahoua, and Agadez toward the mines at Arlit the migration route follows the old caravan

trail 250 miles to the east. Police and NGO contacts were unanimous on this point - the principal trafficking/migration route through Niger starts south of Zinder, at the Nigerian border north of Kano. It then moves north through Zinder city and region, and arrives in Agadez via Aderbissinat in central Niger.

¶ 15. Agadez is a "resting point" for migrants and TIP victims, who have usually traveled there from coastal West Africa. In Agadez, many stop to seek the funds to continue their journey. Some wait for up to three months in the hope of obtaining an Algerian tourist visa that would allow them to go north legally, and by bus. Contacts informed us that the Western Union outlet in Agadez does a thriving business by providing migrants with funds sent by their families. On the other hand, Regional Police Commissioner Rachid Assoumane noted that 70% of the city's prostitutes were migrants from Niger's southern neighbors - Togo, Benin, Cameroon, Ghana, Nigeria - suggesting the diverse means and situations of the migrants who wash up in town. Local contacts note that many migrants spend months in Agadez while seeking the funds to continue north.

¶ 16. From Agadez, most migrants and TIP victims move toward Libya, sometimes by way of southern Algeria. A 275 mile trek on desert trails brings them to Bilma and Dirkou, small Nigerien towns 230 miles south of the Libyan border. From Bilma / Dirkou, they travel across the border by pick-up truck or jeep. These small, fast vehicles are driven by local operators and may hold as many as 33 people. Typically, the drivers will leave their clients on the outskirts of Libyan or Algerian towns at night, allowing them to enter town on foot, and seek onward transportation there. The voyage from Agadez to the area of Djanet, Algeria can take four or five days, and prices vary widely depending on a migrant's experience, bargaining ability, and willingness to wait. Police and local officials claimed that Nigerien migrants and

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TIP victims pay traffickers between 45,000 and 50,000 CFA (\$90.00 and \$100.00) to move them between their homes in the Tahoua region and Libya. COMMENT: If true, this would suggest that traffickers are operating on very small margins, as that is about the price one would pay to go via conventional transport. END COMMENT

¶ 17. Others, particularly third country nationals with few ties and little local knowledge, are less fortunate. In some cases, Libyan traffickers take passports and identity documents from their customers, who must pay their debt in order to get them back. Local contacts estimated that third country nationals pay between \$200 and \$300 for their trips north. During Poloff's trip to Agadez, a relevant article appeared on the front page of the town's paper: "Air Info." Featuring pictures of broken down trucks heavily laden with persons, and a group holding a sign saying: "Ghana Community Dirkou," the article noted that countless migrants made their way north through the region each year, and stressed the fact that many were defrauded by unscrupulous "one man tour agencies." It also stressed other dangers: breakdowns, capture by the Libyans, and death in the desert. The article noted that many migrants make four of five attempts before either succeeding or giving up.

ASSESSING THE ORIGINS & TAKING A LOOK AT A MIGRANT TOWN

¶ 18. Such motivation is comprehensible. While Niger itself is the source of relatively few TIP victims or migrants, the conditions that motivate Nigeriens to move may actually be harsher than those facing the coastal West Africans. When asked to comment on the origins of Nigerien migrants, Agadez authorities listed several unsurprising sources: Tahoua Region, especially the departments of Abalak and Tchintabaraden; Northern Zinder Region; and, Diffa. From

their description, it seems that Niger's "migration belt" overlaps with its "red band" of food insecurity (so called because of its alarming depiction on the color-coded maps of food security donors). This agro-pastoral belt, which runs the length of the country, lies between 60 and 120 miles north of the southern border. It is the zone hardest hit by periodic droughts and by the seasonal food insecurity that afflicts the country every year. On the way to Agadez, Poloff stopped in the red band, visiting a town long known as a source of economic migrants, and witnessed some of the push and pull factors motivating people to go abroad.

¶9. The town of Illela, located south of the central Nigerien city of Tahoua, is famous for "exode," or seasonal migration. While Illelans seem to go to Cote d'Ivoire rather than North Africa, their motivations for moving are the same as those of their neighbors. Poverty and weak agricultural yields, poor health care, education, and infrastructure combine to paint a pretty bleak picture. People enjoy few local opportunities to supplement their income. At the end of each agricultural season, Illelans head south to work as itinerate salesmen or seasonal laborers in Cote d'Ivoire. As much as regional poverty might "push" Illelans to do this, the incentives that "pull" them toward the coast were equally evident during our visit. Illela's "Quartier Plateau" neighborhood featured new concrete houses, conspicuous in a town of baked mud "bancos" architecture. Locals pointed them out as products of the exode - built by people rather like themselves who had gone south for several seasons and made it big. These status symbols represent both the success of past migrants and the aspirations of many to come.

SCOPE OF THE PROBLEM & SOCIAL IMPLICATIONS FOR AGADEZ

¶10. Poloff's December 12 meeting with Rachid Assoumane, Chief of the National Police for the Agadez Region, addressed the law-enforcement and social implications of the migrant wave. Ambient crime levels in the city of Agadez are low by western standards but migrants both contribute to this problem and have to live with it. In 2006, youth crime in this city of 100,000 people consisted of 58 thefts, four attempted thefts, 33 batteries, 17 assaults, and 7 cases of driving without a license. The Police Chief attributed most of this problem to drug abuse - mostly marijuana smoking and glue sniffing - and poverty. In spite of foreigners' prominence in some criminal activities, like prostitution, few Agadezians seem to blame migrants for crime, and there appears to be little social tension between natives and those traveling through.

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¶11. The Chief noted that nine human traffickers had been arrested this year. Most, however, have gotten off with relatively light punishment due to Niger's lack of an anti-TIP law. Three were released without being charged, while six others were arrested and charged with the abduction of minors. Of the six traffickers charged, four were released when the Agadez Regional Court found no grounds for prosecution. Two remain in custody awaiting trial as of this writing. NOTE: Niger's lack of a dedicated anti-Trafficking in Persons law has taken its toll on local efforts to punish traffickers. Other laws, such as those on child abduction, can be applied but often fail to yield convictions in cases where parents have chosen to give their children to someone - even pay them - for transport north. Post contacts in the Ministry of Justice informed Poloff that Niger's draft anti-TIP law has been submitted to the Council of Ministers for approval, after which it will be submitted to the National Assembly for adoption in the spring. END NOTE

¶12. The lack of an anti-TIP law is only one legal factor complicating the fight against human trafficking. Victims are hard to distinguish from other migrants, and migrants as a

group have every right to be in Niger; as long as they have an ECOWAS National Identity card, they need neither a visa nor a passport and have a legal right to travel within any ECOWAS member country. Given the composition of the migrant wave, this poses problems for few. Chief Assoumane argued that Nigeriens, who seem to go north for a season of labor and then return to their farms, are fewer in number than the coastal West Africans who go north to get to Europe and stay. Representatives of the Gendarmerie (paramilitary police charged with rural law enforcement) and National Force for Intervention and Security (FNIS: border security force) agreed with Assoumane, and estimated that thousands of persons are moving north through Niger every year. Given the porous Nigerien border, the adroitness of the smugglers, and the paucity of police, few will ever be interdicted.

THE COMMITTEE ON REPATRIATION: ARTISTS OF THE POSSIBLE

¶13. While Niger has had limited success in staunching the migrant flow toward the north, neither Libya nor Algeria honor the ECOWAS ID card, and both have reasonably effective border security forces. Consequently, many migrants end up seeing Agadez twice. Hundreds are captured and turned back each year. Irrespective of their national origins, they wind up in Niger. The Regional Government of Agadez attempts to respond to the needs of repatriated persons, even though it has few resources even for its own people. Through Agadez Region's "Committee on Repatriation," the government does its best to welcome and reintegrate migrants and TIP victims. In a meeting with Poloff on December 14, the committee's members discussed their work, migration and trafficking, and the many challenges to which they attempt to engineer solutions.

¶14. The Secretary General of the Region of Agadez chairs the committee. Other members include the Regional Chiefs of the National Police and the Gendarmerie (paramilitary police force), and the Social Development Director for the Region. Established in 2005, the committee has received some material support from UNICEF - 1,000 water containers, 1,000 bars of soap, and 1,000 blankets. As of December 2006, the Committee had dealt with approximately 450 migrants. NOTE: It is difficult to say how many of these persons were trafficking victims versus independent migrants. The committee devotes more attention to aiding returnees than to investigating their circumstances, and most information about them is anecdotal. However, while no one was able to say whether trafficking victims were included in the figure, it seems highly probable that some were. END NOTE.

¶15. Aside from the materials given by UNICEF, the Committee has few of its own. The Direction of Social Development, the Red Cross, and the Agadez Youth Center all serve as temporary shelter space for returnees, most of whom claim to have no money or food. The Police work with local transporters and truckers' unions to organize free transportation south for the returnees. Most leave Agadez on the tops of tractor-trailers, heading for southern Niger and the border. No one can be sure how many jump off at the next stop, turn north, and try their luck again.

¶16. Poloff noted many signs of charity on the part of the committee members, who have given small sums of money and food out of their own pockets to help many returnees. Absent

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major international efforts to assist the committee, they cannot do much more than that. While the committee members complained that Europeans were providing assistance to the migrant repatriation efforts of "front line states" like Algeria and Libya while neglecting efforts in Niger and Mali, they reserved most of their criticism for Libya. The destination for most of the migrants passing through Niger, Libya was widely criticized by the committee for its policy of rounding up every migrant it could find and, irrespective

of the persons' nationality, dumping them all across the border in Niger. Often left far from any source of sustenance, these returnees risked death or injury until discovered by Nigerien authorities and shipped south to Agadez or Bilma/Dirkou.

¶117. The committee contrasted this approach with that of Algeria, which drew considerable praise for border policing that was both effective and humane. Algerians, Poloff was told, keep the Nigerien consul informed and coordinate the hand-off of migrants at the border. Participants characterized Algeria as more "respectful of the rights and dignity," of migrants. The importance of this was underscored by the group's sober estimation that at least 75 persons had died in the desert during 2006 while trying to cross illegally.

¶118. Like the police, the Committee members found it difficult to distinguish TIP victims from other migrants. Children were a special case, and could be singled out when traveling without their parents. However, the committee was aware of what constitutes trafficking and was able to cite a prominent incident. In one recent case, girls from Nigeria were brought as far as Agadez by a trafficker, who then told them to prostitute themselves in order to raise money for the trip north. Not counting on such treatment, these migrants turned TIP victims sought help from local police, who were able to arrange for their return to Nigeria.

¶119. COMMENT: Poloff commended the committee on its good work, and suggested that it could contact the Embassy of Nigeria in Niamey for assistance, at least with Nigerian victims. Post has discussed TIP with the Embassy of Nigeria in the past, and found Embassy staff from the Ambassador on down to be conversant with the problem and dedicated to helping their citizens with repatriation when necessary. This sort of partnership can help the committee to better address the needs of TIP victims, as distinct from migrants. Victims, like the Nigerian girls discovered this year, are those who got more than they bargained for and are looking for a way out. Efforts to help and repatriate them are likely to be appreciated and cooperated with. The sort of help the committee offers, however, is of little interest to most returnees. Having come all the way from the coast, few are returned to Agadez by choice, and most undoubtedly prefer to have another go at the border to a truck ride south. END COMMENT.

UNICEF & AFETEN: HELPING CHILD TIP VICTIMS

¶120. While children may be just as determined as adults to move north and seek their fortune, they are more easily identified and more often genuine TIP victims - actually under the control of someone who is profiting from their movement. Moreover, at least in the case of Nigeriens, the GON can compel their return to their parents. With a G/TIP ESF funded grant, UNICEF and a local NGO partner, AFETEN, are attempting to reach out to child TIP victims in Agadez, Bilma, and Dirkou. The project has thus far trained a team of 16 workers at the Agadez bus-station to identify possible child victims of TIP, and to work with the NGO and the police to rescue them. During the course of the year, this "vigilance committee" has identified 14 children and contributed to the identification and arrest of several traffickers. Traffickers have responded to this strategy by shifting their locations, and attempting to avoid the station. However, by virtue of AFETEN's close cooperation with transporters and their unions, the "vigilance committee's" reach extends to most transport axes. Thanks to its close cooperation with the police, AFETEN continues to succeed in identifying and rehabilitating TIP victims in Agadez, Bilma, and Dirkou.

¶121. Children are taken to AFETEN's shelter, are interviewed, and receive food, shelter, and elementary counseling. The children are then taken home to their villages (so far all

have come from Tahoua region) where their parents and

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traditional chiefs are sensitized to the dangers of trans-Saharan travel and TIP. Recognizing the link between trafficking and poverty, the project also uses microcredit to help families meet their material needs. NOTE: The focus on training for children, communities, transport workers, and the authorities dovetails with other NGOs' efforts in this direction. Timidria, better known for its efforts to eliminate traditional slavery, started a publicity campaign in 2006 to inform migrants of the dangers facing them in the desert. While neither AFETEN, Timidria, nor UNICEF hope to curb the urge to migrate north, all hope to minimize the human cost of the "exode," and foster understanding of its risks. END NOTE

COMMENT: CONFRONTING NORTH NIGER'S
TRAFFICKING RACKET; WHAT IS TIP,
WHAT IS NOT, AND WHAT CAN ONE DO
ABOUT IT?

¶22. Smuggling of every kind is a big and occasionally violent business in Agadez. When asked about new houses going up, locals will often identify the builder as a "trafficker," of some kind. Indeed, smuggling and connected crime formed a backdrop of sorts to our visit. A Nigerien customs officer was shot and killed while attempting to intercept a drug or cigarette trafficker's vehicle. French tourists were robbed at gunpoint in the scenic Air Mountains. Police commented on foreign prostitutes and the incidence of street crime. These actions are linked by their actors. Many Nigeriens suggest that former Tuareg rebels, using weapons, trucks and know-how acquired during their (1991 - 1995) rebellion against the Nigerien state are among the most effective and politically sensitive smugglers.

¶23. While trafficking in general may be a massive affair, exploitative Trafficking in Persons (characterized, inter alia, by passports retained, usurious fees charged, forced labor, or sexual exploitation) is only one segment of a vast market. Indeed, most of what goes on in northern Niger might be more accurately described as the transportation of willing illegal immigrants for money. Most of the Nigerien operators who do this are local people with pick-up trucks, who have neither the network nor the inclination to keep someone in bondage to them. Even at the higher end - \$300 - traffickers' reported fees do not seem so high that a family or individual client could not pay them. Neither the authorities nor the NGOs were able to identify many cases where persons had been exploited, at least in Niger. Police had no evidence to suggest that foreign prostitutes in Agadez were working for anyone other than themselves. Many migrants may find themselves as victims of exploitative human trafficking only once they reach their destination. Indeed, we do not know what happens to these persons upon their arrival in Libya, Algeria, or Europe. Moreover, as few of the migrants are Nigerien, stories of exploitation may reach relatives and villages in coastal Africa before they are recounted in Niger. Being neither the principal source nor the principal destination of migrants and TIP victims, Agadez raises almost as many questions as it answers. These questions, in turn, make it much harder to arrive at any estimate of how many genuine TIP victims float in the migrant wave.

¶24. No one will ever be able to disentangle all of these questions from each other. Africa's poverty and Europe's promise yield economic migration, which yields trafficking. Aside from obvious cases (children, or TIP victims who seek police help) the regions' governments will be unable to identify most victims or arrest most traffickers, just as they will be unable to stop the movement of their citizens. For those who are discovered or who seek help, however, the Government of Niger and its NGO partners have both the will

and some of the means necessary to assist. Continuing efforts to sensitize all parties - government authorities, NGOs, economic migrants, transporters, etc. - to the nature and danger of TIP will be helpful. If nothing else, such efforts could yield a savvier generation of economic migrants, better able to avoid exploitation by human traffickers while pursuing their dream of a better life. END COMMENT

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